

A myes Bya khyung, dignified and magnificent, towers among its shorter peers behind the capital city of Reb gong. Frequently, Heaven seems to scatter white flowers on the mountain peak, making it splendidly picturesque. The mid slopes of the mountain were once covered with dense forest where countless animals thrived. Locals dared not go there alone or without weapons, in fear of being attacked by animals. However, they often did go there in small groups, as the forest was the main source of fuel for local people. At the foot of the mountain is an immense grassland full of valuable herbs and diverse flowers, which emit an overpowering fragrance. Babbling brooks flow from springs on the grassland, and quench the thirst of both people and livestock.

From their ancestors, the people of Reb gong had inherited the belief that the mountain is a deity called A myes Bya khyung. This deity has the most exalted position among local deities in Reb gong. People respectfully burn juniper and offer sweet food to this deity before they themselves eat anything. While doing this, they also express their innermost feelings to the deity, and ask for whatever they want. Some religious devotees read scriptures in meditation caves on this mountain.

Since early times, generations of smiling nomads had happily shared this pastureland, herding together and helping one another. Every year, they all gathered together to celebrate various sacred rituals. Marriage relationships between the tribes were also established. Consequently, other communities admired them and hoped their life would one day be as pleasant. In this way, Blon che Village was established, its reputation grew, and it became known throughout Reb gong.

Years passed swiftly and social transformations occurred one after another. The number of nomads increased. Household requirements increased and greed ended that once happy life.

Conflict began. The community divided into Blon che bde chen and Blon che rga ra communities. Conflict between these two communities led to killing, and the beautiful grassland gradually became a bloody battlefield where ruthless conflicts raged. Revenge and unspeakable malice led to twenty years of conflict and more than fifty deaths. Gradually, each tribe realized that conflict brought nothing but more revenge. People yearned for peace but dared not speak their thoughts because of memories of the martyrs who had died protecting their territory. The flames of the martyrs' parents and siblings' raging hate burned as high as Bya khyung Mountain. The only recourse they saw was more revenge.

Fortunately, high *bla ma* and various neighboring tribal chieftains ended the conflicts and brought a peaceful life and relief from immeasurable sorrow and misery. However, unbearable enmity had pierced each villager's heart and, when they recalled the battles and martyrs, the only thing in their mind was revenge. Afterwards, though the conflicts ceased, the community had lost its previous unity.

Time rushed on like the Dgu chu River, and life on the grassland grew more complex. Laughter was heard as rarely as flowers were seen growing in the sky. Meanwhile, the once-honest villagers became increasingly cunning. No one trusted anyone, not even their own relatives. Leaders cared only about their own benefit and worked for their own interest. The government divided the grassland between families and, predictably, government and local leaders colluded and allotted pastures according to the bribes they received. It was unfair, because the best pastures were then controlled by the well-connected families and their relatives, while high places and barren lands were given to poor families. Some of the latter families settled together and created Si rigs Village, where the climate was as cold as freezing earth, and sparse grass supported few livestock. As the calamity of harsh weather repeated itself several years in a row, and most of the livestock died, meeting basic needs for food and clothing became problematic. Life was unfair and Si rigs villagers became as poor as beggars. Meanwhile, few respected those who lived there. Villagers were the subject of frequent disdain and

humiliation.

Time amid such difficulties seemed to pass as slowly as a tortoise climbing a Himalayan mountain. People experienced unbearable conditions, and the only thing yearned for was a quick death.

Unbelievably, it eventually turned out that Si rigs village was situated on a veritable gold mine, as their barren lands were the ideal place for caterpillar fungus to grow. Caterpillar fungus grows at high altitude. Its horn is red and the body is yellow. The biggest is as big as a duck's webbed foot, and the smallest is as small as a chicken claw. It grows from May to June. It is a worm that becomes infected with a fungus and then dies.

Over time, more and more businessmen came to Si rigs to collect this precious substance, and prices increased. Caterpillar fungus income was attractive and the number of collectors grew ever larger, which brought renewed conflict to the grassland. Avaricious tribes and other communities wanted the best places for themselves, which led to various pretexts to invade others' lands.

Si rigs villagers were brave and their unity was as strong as stone. Although Blon che bde chen and Blon che rga ra villages cooperated to fight Si rigs Village, they failed to snatch the land where caterpillar fungus grew.

More years passed, and a new battle started between Si rigs and Sha sbrang villages. Sha sbrang, an agro-pastoral community near Reb gong City,<sup>1</sup> created the excuse that, long ago, ancestors of its current residents had herded in the caterpillar fungus place. Since the land had once belonged to them, Sha sbrang concluded that they had claim to it. Thus a battle began and continued for seven years. For Si rigs Village, it was a difficult war because its adversary was rich and had a population more than twice their own. Furthermore, Sha sbrang had many weapons. During the seven-year battle, Sha sbrang Village lost five men and much wealth, but gained much land. Si rigs

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<sup>1</sup> Most Sha sbrang residents herd and farm. A minority rely exclusively on agriculture. Sha sbrang Village is at the foot of a mountain and has fertile fields. The grasslands on the mountain are used for grazing.

village lost two men and their living conditions worsened. Si rigs villagers, knowing that the battle could not be won, surrendered. Afterward, they herded elsewhere and enjoyed a more peaceful life.

Sha sbrang villagers dug caterpillar fungus and made plans for getting more land. Meanwhile, another avaricious village appeared: Chu ma, which was wealthier than Sha sbrang Village, and had a population three times larger than Sha sbrang.

Chu ma Village was disciplined in battle. Village men aged seventeen and older were required to join its militia. Every soldier prepared a new gun and sufficient bullets before the time of battle. The militia was divided into groups. Within each group, a commander was chosen to be responsible for his soldiers' safety. The chieftain and commanders invited soldiers who were skilled marksmen to teach Chu ma's militia how to use the guns and protect themselves during battle. After practice, villagers were confident about the upcoming battle. Fearless young people often tried to start trouble with anyone from Sha sbrang Village. Once, some drunk men caught a Sha sbrang Villager on the road as he was returning home, ruthlessly beat him, stripped him naked, and then released him. Chu ma Village chieftains ignored this behavior and did not scold the young men. It seemed that they were challenging Sha sbrang Village. Meanwhile, Sha sbrang villagers did the same, cruelly beating Chu ma villagers and preparing their own weapons.

When the fighting began in earnest, all those who had prepared participated fearlessly, first using slingshots. During battle, each village had casualties. As their hatred deepened, they began to use guns. Meanwhile, a high *bla ma* and locally well-known wise men traveled to each village, teaching that war brought only suffering and an endless cycle of revenge. They tried their best to stop the fighting, hoping for peace between Chu ma and Sha sbrang communities.

They failed. The two villages fought for about ten years. Each village suffered more than five deaths. The government then, abruptly, divided the caterpillar fungus land into two parts. The largest was the lower part, which it gave Sha sbrang Village. The other section belonged to Chu ma Village. Everyone knew that the prefecture governor had accepted a large amount of money from Sha

sbrang Village for assistance during the war, and also that he needed to resolve problems in Reb gong in order to be promoted. After the division of land, the governor reported that no conflicts remained and boasted that people were now living in peace and joy. He was rewarded and complimented by provincial leaders, then promoted and reassigned to lead another prefecture.

On the surface, the conflict had been resolved by the government's division of land; but, the battle continued, especially during caterpillar fungus collection season. Sha sbrang Village had the largest, most valuable location and hired fungus collectors because they themselves could not cover the entire area. Chu ma Village owned a small area of land, but had a larger population, and therefore lacked land. Government interference thus inflicted much pain on Chu ma villagers.

When I was seven, most of my township's residents went to 'Bru gu chung to collect caterpillar fungus for free because we were invited by Sha sbrang Village. They hoped that we could help mediate if there was conflict between Chu ma and Sha sbrang. It was a good chance for us to make money. Whenever caterpillar fungus season came, Mother left all of my siblings in my maternal grandmother's home and went to dig the valuable herb. Father was busy with his work at school, and did not have enough time to take care of us. During the caterpillar fungus season I was bored and missed Mother every second. My relatives cared for me and were kind to me, but I did not experience the comfortable feeling that I had whenever Mother was with me. I was full of sadness and became thinner. It was just like I was living in Hell. I often counted how many days had passed in Mother's absence. I waited for Mother to return, and felt the passing time was as long as a dozen years.

I dreamed of digging caterpillar fungus because Mother had promised to take me with her. I incessantly asked her when we would set out and told my friends that I would go. I asked my friends how to find caterpillar fungus and how to dig it, because they were more experienced than me. Their parents halted their schooling and took them to dig caterpillar fungus every year. Children have keen eyesight and can find it more easily than elders. I was often puzzled about why

my parents did not take me to help them make money, and scolded them when my friends went off to dig. I did not understand my parents' decision until I was in middle school.

That year, the villagers decided to start off on the twenty-fifth day of the fourth lunar month. Father helped Mother collect what we would need and pack it into big sacks. Sister Tshe mo mkhar went to the courtyard to feed our mules grass and beans to strengthen them for the coming trek. I rushed out to see what other people were doing, and hurried back inside to report their activities to my parents. Father laughed and continued with his work. Mother cooked a wonderful dinner for us, but I was too excited to eat very much. At first that night, I could not sleep, but finally I found rest.

What seemed like only a few moments later, Mother shook my shoulders to wake me. It was still dark outside, but I did not complain. I immediately got up and went to wash my face. Meanwhile, my parents put our gear on the mules and tied it tightly with ropes. We set out with my relatives after a simple breakfast.

Father escorted us to the border of the village and told me what I should and shouldn't do.

I promised, "I'll obey Mother, or else I'm not your son," and watched satisfaction cross Father's face. He smiled as he kissed me, and then returned home. Villagers held their mules' reins and briskly walked in single file. I followed Mother and my sisters and brothers as well as I could. When dawn broke, we had already gone halfway. The weather was bad. Chilly wind stung my face. I was extremely tired and hungry, but I dared not mention it to Mother as my friends walked on without complaint. I plodded onward without relief. We had lunch and rested for an hour later. I drank a cup of water and lay on the ground to rest.

Curiously, I was on a mule wrapped in Mother's robe when I awoke. I felt comfortable because my tiredness had vanished. Snow was falling fiercely, covering the ground so that everything was white. It was beautiful scenery, but villagers were bemoaning the bad weather and cursing the heavens. I dismounted when we reached the base of a mountain. Sister gave me a piece of dry bread. I held it in my left hand, nibbled on it, and climbed the mountain with a walking

stick. Mother and my brothers watched the mules attentively as they placed their feet on the slippery path.

We moved on and reached our destination at around midday. We unloaded the mules and put our belongings on big stones because the ground was wet. I shivered where I sat on a stone, but I felt glad we had reached our destination. Mother and Brother located a piece of level ground for our tent. While we pitched the tent, my sisters Tshe mo mkhar and 'Brug mo collected firewood in a nearby forest.

Brother Snying dkar rgyal helped Mother store our gear inside the tent and made two beds from stones and dried grass. I was so hungry I could barely stand. I asked Mother for some food. There was only dried bread. I had no appetite to eat dried bread again, so I took a short nap. It was night when I awoke, and my stomach was rumbling from hunger. The odor of cooking food attracted me and I wanted it more than gold. I rubbed my eyes and asked when we would eat.

Mother gave me a sweet smile and asked me where I wanted to have supper.

I said I wanted to eat in my warm bed; I didn't want to get up because the tent wasn't as warm as home. I had never had such a delicious supper before. I ate in a rush while gazing at the pot. Mother and my brother and sisters giggled and teased me that I shouldn't eat the pot. I smiled at them and continued eating.

I went for a walk with Brother after I was full. Our neighbor had lit what seemed like thousands of candles. Some households were also using solar power. It was a beautiful scene, just like stars had fallen on the ground. A bright, clear moon was rising over the mountain. I could see everywhere without a flashlight. Brother took a cigarette from his pocket, lit it, inhaled deeply, and looked around. I was astonished and asked what he was looking for. He ignored my questions and, instead, led me back to the tent to sleep. Mother and my sisters were preparing for bed. I couldn't sleep because of our neighbors' loud conversations. They were talking about when the snow would melt and where fungus grew.

The next day was lovely, the sunshine was bright, the sky was blue, and there was not even a whisper of wind. People were busy re-

arranging their tent's positions, and bed and hearth locations. Mother spread out our clothes to dry. I was the only person who had nothing to do. I asked Mother if I could go play with my friends. She agreed but told me to be careful, because there the strong light from the snow would injure my eyes. She took dark sunglasses from a bag and gave them to me. I rushed to my friends' tents and called them to come out. We played and made snowmen near the tents. While we were playing, I noticed some people wearing uniforms carrying a lot of gear. It was the police.

The Sha sbrang Village chief took some young men and went to greet them. They carried all the policemen's gear above our position and helped them pitch their tents. I happily thanked the mountain deity and government for sending the policemen. I hurried to our tent and shared this news with my family. They surprised me by being displeased. I was confused and wondered if there was something wrong with what I had reported. I liked policemen and even dreamed of being one myself. I thought policemen were heroes because they spent their lives serving others, protecting society from criminals. I hoped the policemen would help solve problems if something bad were to happen.

After several hours of bright sunshine for a few days, the snow melted and created small rivulets in every nook and cranny. People formed small groups with their relatives and friends and discussed where to go first, because caterpillar fungus grows at different times in different places. It appears earlier at lower elevations. Some places never produce the fungus. Diggers suffered losses if they didn't dig in the right place. Those acquainted with this place didn't want to share their experience with others and often pretended to be busy with chores in their tent.

Mother hurriedly came inside our tent wearing a big smile, and whispered that Aunt Tshe ring mtsho had promised to take us with her. Aunt had been hunting fungus for several years in a row in this place and had good experience. Mother warned us that this was a big secret and also a good opportunity for us to collect more than others. Mother cooked dinner at five p.m. and we went to bed early. I woke up at midnight, annoyed by our noisy neighbors. While

wondering where the noise was coming from, I realized it was coming from the policemen's tents. I was frightened by this realization, because I thought the policemen must have caught some troublemakers who were drinking and bothering the people who were sleeping. I wrapped my head in my quilt and tried to sleep, but ghost stories came to my mind, which scared me. Fortunately, the noise continued outside. Now, in my frightened state, it had become a good companion because I knew others were near. Eventually, I fell back asleep.

Mother pulled my quilt away, waking me. I raised my head and looked around. Everybody else was up. Although I was still sleepy, I got up quickly because it was my first day to collect caterpillar fungus. I put on my clothes and washed my face quickly. Then we ate breakfast. While I slowly chewed, I imagined that I had collected many fungi and gotten a reward from Mother. Then, Brother suddenly shouted at me, "Hey! Time to get ready! Let's go!" I took my facemask and gloves from a faded bag, and hurriedly asked Mother where my spade was. Meanwhile, Aunt Tshe ring mtsho appeared, and we followed her.

The collectors resembled ants streaming in different directions after a naughty boy uses a stick to disturb their anthill. Some people seemed unsure of where to go and stood near their tents, watching others. We started looking for the caterpillar fungus on a small flat area not far from the tents. Suddenly Brother Snying dkar rgyal shouted to announce that he had broken his egg. Diggers describe the first caterpillar fungus each day as an egg. People don't ask you if you found a fungus, but if you broke your egg. Most people shout when they find a fungus. I rushed to Brother and looked at the caterpillar fungus. It was different than what I had imagined. The head was red mixed with dark brown. Only a short head was visible on the surface on the ground. It was barely visible. Brother pushed his spade near the caterpillar fungus and easily pulled it up.

Brother's good luck made me nervous, because I was competing with my family. I calmed myself and concentrated on looking for caterpillar fungus. A bit later, I proudly broke my egg. Mother praised me and promised to buy snacks for me. I continued

happily collecting caterpillar fungus. I had collected forty-one by the day's end.

People were as avaricious as hungry wolves and barely rested. They collected day after day. We collected different amounts each day. Some days we found many and on other days it was difficult even to break the egg. The happiest thing was that there was no conflict between Sha sbrang and Chu ma villages throughout those fifteen days. People thanked the territorial deities for protecting us.

The number of caterpillar fungi was dwindling and people were hoping for a big rain to nourish the earth. Chu ma and Sha sbrang youth gathered and wandered everywhere. Sometimes they scuffled when they encountered each other. The policemen carelessly stayed in their tents, gambling and drinking beer. We could hear their constant laughter.

One lovely morning I followed Brother far away from our tent to collect more fungus. The only creatures near us were sheep and yaks. Brother led me up a small hill. My eyes involuntarily went in the direction of our home in the distance. Brother scolded me several times, but I couldn't stop looking. I recalled when I was at home, playing with my friends. I started to feel homesick and tears flowed from my eyes. Meanwhile, Brother came and sat in front of me. I thought Brother would scold me but he didn't. I was astonished and sat silently. He took a cigarette from his left pocket, lit it, stretched his right hand out, stroked my head, smiled, and said, "I'm also terribly homesick, just like you. I want to go home immediately, but it's not the right time. We must remember why everyone is working so hard. If we don't grab this chance we'll get very little, and then we won't have a happy life."

I understood. His encouragement moved me, and I vowed to work hard. Meanwhile, an old woman emerged near the hill. She had a stick in her right hand and prayer beads in her left hand. She constantly murmured a mantra. She carried a baby on her back and staggered toward us. Her hair was as white as snow and her face was as wrinkled as a tortoise's. She must have been at least sixty years old. She sat by us and asked us where we were from. Her speech was lovely and elegant. It was soon lunchtime, and she took a bottle of

milk tea from her bag and handed it to me. I shared a piece of dried bread with her. I learned that she was from Sha sbrang Village and that her name was Aunt Mgon po mtsho.

When I asked about the conflict between Sha sbrang and Chu ma, her face changed immediately, shocking me. She then told Brother and me her story:

My husband died during the conflict between our village and Si rigs when I was twenty-seven years old. My family was poor. I had three sons. They were too young to help me, and so everything fell on my shoulders. My life was as difficult as a beggar's. Time passed so slowly for me and the children. People despised me and my relatives. I swallowed my misery and solved my problems as best I could by myself. My mother endlessly encouraged me to remarry but I refused. My hope was my children.

Eventually the children grew up and everything changed. My eldest son married a woman who is benevolent, lovely, and hardworking. I was then free from much hard work and largely liberated from suffering. After a year, my daughter-in-law gave birth to a son, bringing happiness and good fortune to my family. We enjoyed a happy life.

Three years passed swiftly and people started to go crazy about money. The conflict over grassland resumed, and many violent battles ensued. All village males above the age of fifteen joined the militia and went to fight. Others stayed at home busy with various rituals, reading scriptures, and beseeching the mountains deities to protect us. Mothers nervously and selfishly prayed for their sons' safety and impatiently waited for their return.

The conflict raged for five months. One day when I was in the *ma Ni* room, I saw a group of exhausted men near the edge of the mountain. When the men drew near, my body involuntarily trembled and my mind couldn't focus. I looked among the men, searching for my son. He was not there. My heart ached as though it had been stabbed with a dagger. Gradually I saw some young men carrying someone on their back. I knew something terrible had happened. I suddenly began hoping those men would never arrive. Finally, they reached the *ma Ni* room with the corpse.

The chieftain and some young men who were carrying the corpse went in to the caretaker's room without a word. The other men stood silently. I dared not look for my son. Tears flowed down my cheeks and plopped onto the ground. Then the

chieftain came and told me to come to the caretaker's room. I pushed him away and said, "Why are you asking me to do this? Where is my son?" and then I fainted.

That afternoon I woke up on my bed. My mother and sisters were around me. I wept and shouted. I told Mother it was all a dream, that it wasn't real. They were weeping, too. Villagers invited *bla ma* and monks to read scriptures, and brought what was needed for the funeral rituals. I didn't want to see anyone in my home, not even relatives. I blamed my evil luck on the sins I must have committed in my former life. I asked why I had come to this world.

A few months passed but I still couldn't accept the reality. My life was full of suffering. I considered suicide, but I couldn't do it when I saw my other sons and grandson.

Aunt Mgon po mtsho's tears flowed down her face and dropped to the ground. I sobbed, too. Though I sympathized, I was too embarrassed to say anything to console her. After a moment, Aunt Mgon po mtsho stood, said goodbye, and went toward her livestock. When I looked at Brother, I saw he had cried too. We had lost our desire to collect caterpillar fungus and returned in the direction of our tent.

We saw many people gathered around the tents when we got near. I felt nervous and rushed to the tents without thinking. Mother and my sisters were already inside. I asked Mother what had happened.

She said, "Chu ma and Sha sbrang villagers fought this morning. Men on each side were hurt."

I was shocked and wondered what would happen next.

We got up and went to collect caterpillar fungus at around nine a.m. the next day. The Sha sbrang Village chieftain told us, "Don't go near the border. You will be responsible for whatever happens if you do. I don't want to start more conflicts." We followed the others and climbed the mountain in front of our camp. Meanwhile, I saw all the Sha sbrang villagers, except for elders and children, going to the borderland. I looked for the policemen. They were in their tents, acting as if nothing special was going on. I imagined that they were unaware of what had happened the day

before. I hoped that they would prevent the coming fight.

I heard a terrible noise from the borderland at around two p.m. I stood, listened carefully, and was sure people were fighting. Some young men climbed to the mountaintop and I followed them. We could see the fighting clearly from our vantage point. Men from the two communities had gathered on the hills on either side of a valley, facing each other, and were using slingshots to fire stones at their enemies. Stones fell to the ground like hail. Some women helped injured men back to the tents, while others were collecting stones and giving them to their men. I looked at our people who were collecting caterpillar fungi, and at the policemen's tents and I hoped they would stop the fighting. But, the policemen did nothing, so all I could do was pray to the mountain deities.

Three hours passed, and the fighting continued. Then I saw some monks near the road. They went directly between the two groups of men and tried to stop the fighting. After a half hour, the fighting stopped and I felt better. I descended the mountain and went to Mother. I guessed she would scold me, but she only asked me what I had seen. I told her everything in detail.

That evening I heard that forty-three men from Sha sbrang Village had been wounded, of whom seven were badly hurt. Chu ma Village had fifty-six wounded, of whom thirteen were so badly hurt that they had been sent to a hospital in Gansu Province. Suddenly our tent door opened and two strangers entered. They were local officials and told us that we had to leave, as they could no longer guarantee our safety. They said they would not help us if we disobeyed. Everyone ignored the local officials, who came repeatedly to persuade us to return home.

Several days passed, and nothing happened between the two feuding groups of villagers, though they often gathered and had menacing standoffs. The collectors were busy collecting caterpillar fungus. Then in the middle of one snowy night, Mother shouted and woke me up. I heard gunshots. I had no idea what to do. Brother carried me outside, and I saw that all of our villagers were running. Sha sbrang men held weapons. Some of them shouted that today was as good a day as any to sacrifice their lives. Women and children were

screaming. I asked Mother what had happened, and she said that Chu ma villagers had surrounded the Sha sbrang villagers. This scared me. I had no time to imagine what would happen and ran as fast as I could. After a moment, everything became quiet, just like nothing had happened. Our village leader shouted at us to return. We silently stood for a moment and hesitatingly returned. The men were not Chu ma villagers – they were policemen. I wondered why the policemen had disturbed us.

Meanwhile, Brother rushed into our tent and told us the policemen had grabbed ten men and wounded seven. I asked Brother, "Why did the policemen hurt innocent people?"

He said, "Provincial leaders came to our county to do an investigation and discovered people were fighting on the grassland. They criticized the local leaders and ordered them to solve the problem. The local leaders were enraged and ordered policemen to catch ten people from each village."

We soon returned home and our lives returned to normal, but what I had seen and heard on the grassland was awful and unforgettable.

#### NON-ENGLISH TERMS

'Bru gu chung འབྲུ་གུ་ཅུང་།

'Brug mo འབྲུག་མོ།

A myes Bya khyung ཨ་མེས་བྱ་མྱུང་།

Blon che བློན་ཅེ།

Blon che bde chen བློན་ཅེ་བདེ་ཅེན།

Blon che rga ra བློན་ཅེ་ར་ར།

Bya khyung བྱ་མྱུང་།

Chu ma ཅུ་མ།

Gansu ཀ་སུ་ཀ་སུ་ཀ་སུ།

Mgon po mtsho མགོན་པོ་མཚོ།

Mtsho sngon མཚོ་སྔོན།  
Pad ma rin chen པད་མ་རིན་ཆེན།  
Reb gong རེབ་གོང་།  
Sha sbrang ཤ་སྤང་།  
Si rigs སི་རིགས།  
Snying dkar rgyal སྟིང་དཀར་རྒྱལ།  
Tshe mo mkhar ཚེ་མོ་མཁར།  
Tshe ring mtsho ཚེ་རིང་མཚོ།